Rose Art Museum Brandeis University

Charles

Twenty
Years of Work

Garabedian

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Preface and Acknowledgments

When I initially encountered Charles Garabedian's art eight or nine years ago, I saw it as an alternative to modernism, as willfully detached from the mainstream, maybe even contemptuous of it. My involvement with the present exhibition, however, has resulted in a change of view, for I have become convinced that the work springs not from a reactionary impulse but from Garabedian's strong-willed desire to discover and pursue his own very personal vision. That that vision relates directly to modernism is the concern of the essay that follows, and I need not recount its terms here, though here is the place to acknowledge my shifted understanding. Because such a small percentage of the art one sees has such an effect, its occurrence should be noted.

I was introduced to Garabedian's work by Charles Kessler, a friend and former student; he has repaid more than amply anything I may have given him in classes that are now distant memories, and I am correspondingly grateful. I also wish to thank Michael Krichman, with whom I have discussed the art on numerous rewarding occasions, and my wife Barbara, who has enthusiastically encouraged my pursuit of the exhibition since its inception. Peter Goulds and Marc Nochella of the L.A. Louver Gallery, Los Angeles, have been invaluable in providing documentation and in coordinating the many invisible elements necessary in bringing such a project to fruition, and I additionally appreciate the support of Donald McKinney at Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York. No exhibition is possible without the generous support of those who are willing to part with works of art from their private collections, and I wish to thank the lenders to this show for making important pictures available to it. The staff of the Museum—Nancy Miller, Judy Smith, Susan Stoops, and Roger Kizik—has played an equally significant role in talking with me about my views on the show, in collating material for the catalog, in arranging the movement of the objects, in organizing their presentation, and in enduring and buffering patiently the enthusiasms and anxieties I experienced in the course of writing the catalog essay. I am naturally indebted to Charles Garabedian—for his generous cooperation on the show, but above all for the model he provides of a genuinely creative and independent-thinking artist, who, through a combination of confidence and humility, is able to keep art and the world in perspective. Finally, I am grateful to Lois Foster and the Patrons and Friends of the Rose Art Musuem; the Rose is a leader in its field, but it could not occupy that position without her and their support.

Carl Belz, Director

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Charles **Garabedian**

Twenty Years of Work

by Carl Belz

Charles Garabedian received his master's degree in painting from UCLA in 1961, a few months before his 38th birthday. He had not yet married, but he'd spent eight years in a Detroit orphanage, he'd been a staff sergeant in the United States Air Force during World War II, and he'd worked on an auto assembly line and as a clerk for the Union Pacific Railroad following the completion of his undergraduate studies at USC in 1950. He says his personal background made him a curiosity among his fellow students and teachers at UCLA, and he describes himself as being very naïve at the time: "I had no idea why I was learning to paint or what I planned to do with it later; I had seen *Lust for Life* and read the book, and I was really impressed —now *that* is naïve."[1] The UCLA experience was not, in other words, a period of honing skills and focusing on a personal statement, which is how we've come to think of graduate study today; rather, the years between 1957 and 1961 were deeply formative, a matter of starting at square one and establishing basic esthetic premises: "There was always a dichotomy in the school while I was there, people working figuratively and people working abstractly. The figurative painters were basically stronger than the abstract painters. The people doing abstract painting were milder in nature, more reserved; we were more arrogant and shouted louder. If I had been surrounded by strong abstract people, I would have discovered contemporary art sooner." The graduate school influence, however, went significantly beyond art-making preferences. Accepted on a probationary basis because he had not previously studied art, Garabedian was required to take undergraduate courses along with his graduate seminars, and this entailed the study of art history. He responded positively, and his interest in the Old Masters remains as strong today as it was when he discovered them. His vision of the past was at the time characteristically naïve: "I thought art evolved up to the fifteenth century and then it was all the same. I didn't know there were movements, so that idea didn't mean much to me; I just thought art existed and was the same for everybody. It took awhile to realize that we evolve and move on, that one thing leads to another, that we build one thing on top of another and make discoveries. As a student, I felt that discovery meant discovering what had already been discovered."

1961, the start of a decade that affected profoundly just about every facet of American society and no less that small fragment of American society known as the art world. In 1961 art-world people were still talking about abstract vs. figurative art, but that controversy got blown away when pop art appeared a year later. What happened with—and after—pop art is well known and is in many ways fun to recall. We were presented with a new movement with just about every new art season and, accordingly, we were introduced to all kinds of new and, we were told, exciting names and ideas. Pop brought high culture down to the level of supermarkets and comic book stands, op gave us visual pranks in the guise of scientific investigation, minimal put monumental sculpture back on the map, field painting seduced us with acres of stained and sensuous color, earthworks romantically transported us back to nature from the chic sterility of Madison Avenue galleries, and conceptual art reminded us of what Duchamp had taught, that an artist can carry his entire oeuvre in a briefcase. California, where Garabedian stayed after finishing his degree at UCLA, quickly got in on the

sixties act. San Francisco was the home of funk painting and sculpture, Los Angeles was the locus of the cool school and the fetish finish, the Pasadena Art Museum made sure that West Coast audiences were kept up to date on the latest trends emanating from New York and, perhaps most notably, *Artforum*, based first in San Francisco and then in Los Angeles, became the clearing house for serious discussion of what all the commotion was about. Fun it is to recall and fun it was to live, but fun pure and simple it was not. Camelot symbolized a new era, and even artists were all of a sudden welcome at the White House, but grim reality kept intruding upon our fantasies of a harmonious and Great Society. Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, James Earl Ray, the 1968 Democratic National Convention, Vietnam. Not that the art world was witness to tragedies of such scope—the Mark Rothko case came later, and it's not clear that the shooting of Andy Warhol qualifies as an assassination attempt—but the sixties were in many ways problematic for art nonetheless. Once whetted, our appetites for the new became insatiable, and we awaited each gallery season with the kind of gossipy excitement that greets new fashions from Paris or that used to greet new cars from Detroit and new releases from the Beatles. In becoming fashionable, art became product, so many goods designed and marketed for consumption. Concomitantly, we tracked artists not in terms of bodies of work revealing growth or spirit or character, but in terms of ascending careers and distinctive signatures; confident that newness meant goodness, we asked not *what* was shown, but *where*, and in whose company, as if talking about media events. Warhol became famous for saying everyone should be famous for fifteen minutes, but that's precisely the rub: "Whatever Happened To ———?" is still a favorite parlor game, and playing it is still accompanied by bewilderment that someone so recently so important could suddenly have become so invisible; the only difference is that we play it now with the names of artists instead of rock stars.

Garabedian remained aloof from much of the sixties hoopla. He taught painting and drawing throughout the decade, at UCLA and in its extension programs, at Colorado College during several summers, and at San Fernando Valley State College. He also exhibited regularly, mostly at the Ceeje Gallery in Los Angeles where he enjoyed several solo shows between 1963 and 1967. The gallery was founded in 1962 by Cecil Hedrick and Jerry Jerome, neither of whom had any art experience, though their very innocence seems to have generated an atmosphere that was receptive to the kind of experimentation Garabedian and his friends were involved with at the time. In a 1975 interview, Garabedian described the gallery's first group show, which included him, Ed Carrillo, Roberto Chavez and Louis Lunette, all of whom had been together at UCLA: "We had a great opening... The place was just packed with well-wishers and they didn't sell a painting. They finally made a few sales out of later shows. Some artists sold, Joan Maffei and a few Carrillos. His work had a good look to it. He could turn out a pretty good painting at that time, whereas the rest of us were all enthusiasm and thumbs, although all of us had a certain amount of ability. I was the least capable of the bunch... Anyway, the gallery immediately took on the reputation of being inconsequential. It wasn't considered as anything but silly and having great parties, but it went along for quite a few years. I think now people are looking back at it in a different way."[2] These remarks indicate the Ceeje must have been an uninhibited place, funky in comparison to the cool school image projected nationally as characteristic of Los Angeles in the sixties. Whatever reputation it enjoyed must also have been confined to the underground. A 1964 special issue of *Artforum* devoted to "The Los Angeles Scene Today" contained a section on figurative art but mentioned the names of only two artists in the Ceeje stable, Louis Lunette and Joan Maffei, neither of whom was included among the seventeen painters whose work was reproduced. The section discussing commercial galleries also bypassed the Ceeje; singled out instead were the Dwan and Ferus Galleries, which featured, respectively, New York artists and the LA cool school.[3]

Being in on the Los Angeles scene seems not to have appealed much to Garabedian, probably because he simply didn't think in those terms, just as he doesn't think in those terms today. "The fetish finish certainly existed and had a strong influence, but it was never something I was involved with or even cared about. How anyone could finish something that way always boggled my mind." To some extent, Garabedian's distance from the scene was also a function of his disinterest in pursuing *style*, his indifference to the well-manicured product. His work has from the outset possessed a unique and highly personal look, but he has all along been content to let that look come about on its own—less a product than a by-product, as it were, of a particular way of working. "When I go into the studio, the studio and I are working together. I'm not just there in a place producing art. The place really comes alive and the studio and I

have a very curious existence together. It's fighting me all the time and I'm fighting it. It's never a convenient place. As I walk through it, I'm constantly breaking things because I haven't placed or stored them properly. I can never find the equipment. I'm never prepared to do anything properly. I find myself carrying something heavy and when I want to put it down in a particular place I find that something else is there. At first I thought it was just bad logic, bad logistics, but lately I've realized that this is the way it works and it's the only way I can work and that's what my work is going to come out of. That's what my work is. This thing here [*Adam and Eve*] it's really a gripping kind of thing yet it's just a mess. There's dirt in the resin, dirt that was just picked up carelessly off the floor. Things like that suddenly become part of it just through carelessness and the rush to deal with my ideas at the time."[4]

Personal inclinations and studio styles notwithstanding, Garabedian's lingering naïveté was also responsible for his being somewhat out of synch with the Los Angeles scene, the sixties, and contemporary art in general. He feels this was largely a function of his educational background: "Most of the Ferus people had gone to commercial art school and had a sense of production and presentation about their work. I met a guy once who went to commercial art school, and he had a class where he learned to draw upside down so he could make presentations to people sitting down in front of him. Going to commercial art school, those people also became involved with contemporary art immediately—in school. We in school were involved with history, the history of art." Not surprisingly, Garabedian recalls his first trip to New York in 1967 as an opportunity to see the Frick Collection and the Metropolitan Museum; he doesn't remember what contemporary painting or sculpture he might have seen. "I think I have to feel that I just don't like art that much at times. I like to see the great art of the past, but getting involved in the struggle of the present is very tiring and hard and maybe even debilitating, although probably necessary." But contemporary art began to impose itself increasingly on his awareness at this time: "The first time I really started becoming aware of liking contemporary art and having a feeling for it was with minimal art—Morris, Kelly, Stella, LeWitt, Andre. I was particularly impressed by Morris and Kelly and not long after that I got involved with the paper sculptures."

The paper sculptures Garabedian refers to were executed in 1967 and exhibited at the Ceeje Gallery that year. Constructed out of cheap butcher paper—"What I needed was quantity, something that was flexible and that I could go through fast"[5]—and based partially on architectural forms such as arches and windows, the sculptures were the largest and most abstract work Garabedian had done, and their bold simplicity coincided in many ways with the minimalist esthetic. They no longer exist—"...built into the paper is its own destruction because as the paper grows older, it rots and gets weaker and these things started rotting and collapsing until finally they were all dead"[6]—but they marked an important turning point in his artistic thinking and development. "Prior to that I think my paintings were unique—not great, but pretty good. With the paper sculpture I took a step backwards and moved into contemporary thinking, but the collage paintings were more unique, grittier, and more consistent. A lot of the paper sculptures failed, but I learned a lot about form from them. I learned a very formal thing, and maybe that's why I say I learned about contemporary art. I was able to step away from telling a story in a picture."

The idea of stepping backwards into contemporary thinking is somewhat ambiguous, at once naïve and insightful, but there was no ambiguity about Garabedian's motivation in making the paper sculptures in the first place: "My final analysis of the situation was that no matter how personal my paintings were up to that point, they still reflected a great deal of what I had been taught...if you make two lines, both of them being extremely reasonable to yourself when you're under instruction, somebody is going to say this one is good, that one is bad. They might both be good but you discard one of them and go where the approval lies. This doesn't mean that you're turning out bad work, it still may be extremely personal, but the good work is coming through a learned area, so there's something missing. In that year off when I got into the sculpture, I suddenly realized that, hell, what's interesting about the sculpture is that I've had no instruction in sculpture. I was never given this formal definition of sculpture as a three-dimensional object occupying space, moving through space, etc., etc. I had never known that language and I had never known what you can't do, so I could just do anything I wanted, primarily because I didn't know anything."[7] This statement is critical for understanding Garabedian's conception of the purpose of art and the artist's job of work. It can be taken casually—"I could do anything I wanted" sounds almost cavalier, as though art-making could be just an irresponsible pastime—but such a reading runs the risk of trivializing the artistic enterprise and

seeing the work as merely amusing, the expression of a child-like disregard for discipline, a descendant of the Duchampian notion that art is whatever the artist puts his signature to. Clearly, freedom is an issue here, but not freedom in the Duchampian sense, not freedom, in other words, that denies art by refusing to discriminate between art and non-art. "The idea that the artist can do anything he wants is not an anti-art stance, it's a pro-art stance, like you're not an artist if you *don't* do anything you want. You're actually obligated, in a funny way, to go crazy. Quality comes from this freedom—not quality that's related to objects, that's something different, but quality as a way of performance, a way of working."

The sixties were heady and stylish, probably not altogether conducive to seeing Garabedian's work at its fullest advantage. This can happen, particularly when we put too much stress on styles and movements and try to fit new esthetic experiences into existing categories instead of taking them on their own terms. Such are the effects of fashions and the media, not to mention our own needs to keep the world conveniently ordered. Compared to the sixties, the decade just past lacked luster. Oil and gasoline crises, rising interest rates, Watergate, deaccessioning at the Met. The art world did its best to distract us with blockbuster exhibitions and giant public sculptures supported by the National Endowment, but recurrent talk about tax shelters and art-as-investment made it clear that the seventies were concerned not with fun and games but with getting down to business. Not surprisingly, realist-type art became the most consistently visible manifestation of the changed situation, although it never coalesced into a movement because it included too many different approaches and too many artists who had been quietly doing it all along. Besides, critics didn't have that much to say about it—catalogs of realist shows are usually weighted toward reproductions rather than text—and collectors didn't seem to need art magazine support, presumably because they could see for themselves what they were getting in terms of patient industry and tangible results. So realism sold without producing too many headlines. Instead of realism, pluralism became the catchword for what art was about in the seventies, and it reflected the fact that the parade of movements we had seen in the sixties had dispersed, leaving artists and art audiences alike milling about and going their individual ways. If the situation lacked luster, it was in any case open, receptive to work that had previously been little seen or appreciated because it didn't fit—like Garabedian's.

Awareness of Garabedian's art began to spread in the 1970s. Charles Kessler organized an 11-year retrospective for California State University at Northridge in 1974, and Marcia Tucker mounted a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1976. Important group shows took place at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, at the New Museum in New York, and at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University. More recently, the La Jolla Museum hosted a 12-year survey called "Just a Great Thing To Do: Selected Works by Charles Garabedian," the title coming from the following remark: "Well, painting is just a great thing to do. I mean, Winston Churchill did it, Eisenhower did it. There's nothing like it and it can't be replaced."[8] Several of the group show titles are also worth mentioning: "Cultural Irony," " 'Bad' Painting," "Mavericks." Together, these suggest the kind of image that Garabedian's work has projected, the image of an irreverent wise guy who not only doesn't fit but who makes a point of not fitting and has fun doing it.

"**A good part of Garabedian's inventiveness can be attributed to his uninhibited anarchism. He's a maverick who refuses to be intimidated by the principles of 'fine art'.**"[9]

"**Garabedian's work is wonderfully perverse, since he's completely uninterested in abiding by the rules of good taste, draughtsmanship, appropriate subject matter, formal composition, or stylistic consistency.**"[10]

"**Approaching the work of Charles Garabedian is something like confronting the elusive joker, the artful dodger, the beguiling trickster.**"[11]

Garabedian's remarks have not discouraged this image. When asked how he felt about his late start as an artist, he said, "I figure it was a liability, not because I'd be making better art now, but simply because I'd be that much further down the road and I would have had fun that much longer. I could have been making paintings for at least twelve more years. I just joy it, and at the time I was working on the railroad." On conceptual art, he made this ingenuous remark: "There are incredible possibilities in visual terms, but at some of these conceptual events someone will come up to you and hand you a ream of typed papers and I just can't read it. I actually made an effort to become less of a reader, thinking I'd get more into visual aspects. I just stopped reading, stopped getting my ideas in a literary way. You get into a visual world where your thinking

actually becomes visual so I gave up reading. It was a type of sacrifice. Now I've got myself to the point where my reading comprehension, which was never too great, is just terrible. I have problems with the funny papers. The only thing I seem to understand is the sports section."[12]

Humorous, irreverent, offbeat, informal—all qualities we came to admire in the seventies, to the extent that, as the exhibition titles mentioned above suggest, we tried to create stylistic categories for a number of artists who wanted least of all to be associated with stylistic categories. In part, this was a reaction to the sixties, to all those beautiful stripes and fields of color, to all those trim geometric sculptures, to all that product and that talk about formalism and the modernist tradition. So, with pluralism we swept all that away, and we quickly fell into the habit of calling most of the art of the seventies post-modernist. The problem, however, is that none of it can be swept away that easily, any more than any one artist, in this case Garabedian, can be simply labeled as humorous, irreverent, offbeat and informal. The qualities certainly apply, but I want to suggest that they do not describe fully what Garabedian and his art are about or what his relation to modernism consists of. Consider these remarks:

"**Creativity is a strange thing, very elusive. The important thing is that everybody has to do something and everybody should find out who they are. That's important. Not even to find out who you are but to investigate who you are, without it being a search with an end in sight but simply as a curiosity. I wonder who I am, what I'm capable of, what I can do—so I figure 'What the hell. Find out.'**"[13]

"**My only concern right now is painting. Other things interest me only as a spectator, like performance, sculpture, installations. Painting itself is difficult enough, I simply don't have the ability to spread myself that thin. I figure I love painting, it's all I can do, all I want to do. I've chosen painting as the area in which to make the utmost discoveries—discoveries, I mean, for myself—and I fear that if I do something else it will take away from the painting. Like if I don't paint for two weeks, I feel I've gotten behind. It's not a reasonable fear, but it exists.**"

"**There's irreverence for certain things, certain ideas of skill, for instance, or certain attitudes toward detail, but no irreverence for the past. If there's an irreverence, it's for the present. I have no respect for the present, but it's out there in the streets and you have to deal with it, which isn't that easy, and in that sense it's exciting because you're part of it. When you go to the studio, it's, you know... the hair on the back of your neck kind of tingles with the excitement of being an artist, and you realize that being an artist means being a very responsible part of the present.**"

"**There are incredible times of doubt, but the doubts have to do with succeeding for myself. I've never doubted that there's a unique kind of talent there, but I've felt there are times when it's come to an end, and I've questioned whether it's that unique, like it's not that much. Times when I feel the work has suddenly lost its vision, those are desperate times. There have been times when I felt I could look in my brain like it was a glass jar and see nothing there and actually reach in with my hand and feel around to see if there were some little crumbs I could grab hold of and use, feeling totally desperate, like there was nothing left, that it was all gone. How do you come out of that? I don't know, you just muck around in the studio, and one day you pick up a little drawing or look at something you did fifteen years ago, or you make a mark, or suddenly you have an idea, and you get started again. I've gone through this any number of times, and I say I'm prepared for the next time, but you're never prepared for it, because it's always devastating.**"

"**The audience is never considered. By nature I'm suspicious of myself and curious about myself. You question and question and tease yourself and try to confuse yourself. I don't think it's true that without an audience you have no reason for working. When you work in relation to an audience you're a designer, not an artist. Painting is great, the dialogue is kind of wonderful. I think it's important that it be a one-to-one dialogue with myself. Once you start thinking of other people, you start thinking, 'let me make this a little clearer.' If you do that with your paintings, it makes the paintings dull.**"

"**I've often thought there's painting and then there are pictures and that I make pictures, but I think of myself as painting—the act is important, the act of painting. The pictures just come. Art itself is a religious thing, and pictures are just objects in the world. That's what art is: what the artist is, what his mind is, *not* what his canvases are. Art**

objects are just residue. It might be nice to be pure and work in a pure way, but if that were the case it would be lousy too, it would be really dull if you just went to the studio and did great work, because it couldn't be great. The important part of it is that you can really do crap if you're not careful. If you knew you were going in there and knock out great paintings it wouldn't be any fun. This is what makes it interesting to be an artist. It's the idea of testing yourself and knowing you can be 100% wrong with each decision, each brushstroke. The fun is wandering around in the fog, with the cliff nearby."

Knowing who you are... discovering yourself... taking responsibility for the present ... groping to find your vision... taking inspiration from within... believing in the act... confronting the unknown. What do these attitudes characterize if not the modernist situation? Do we want to call them romantic? Naïve? And if we do, are we not simply dismissing them, saying they belong to another time and place and that they constitute charming but finally inadequate strategies for coping with the here and now? Or perhaps we want to say they are a bit serious, maybe even too serious? After all, aren't many of the other remarks genuinely hilarious? And aren't the pictures equally funny—a guy being shot while sitting on the toilet? A drawing that looks like a kid scribbled all over it? A woman standing in a bathroom surrounded by bones? A nude in a landscape who doesn't even know how to walk? And if we say this, what would it mean? That seriousness and humor are mutually exclusive? Or that seriousness is all right as long as it's not pushed too hard, offered up in too large a dose? The sixties continue to haunt us, reminding us to stay cool, to guard carefully the relationship between tongue and cheek. They haunt us, too, in terms of modernism, for they left us thinking that it had become more and more narrow, a refinement poised on stripe and stain, purifying itself to the point of extinction. But it has always been more than that, broader and deeper, able to elicit and accommodate a variety of artistic expressions dealing with our efforts to find ourselves from within and to articulate our discoveries. It will have passed only when we have stopped doing that.

In a 1976 essay on Garabedian's work, Charles Kessler wrote the following: "In *Henry Inn No.1* (1970)... Garabedian sets up a relatively neutral structure of two parallel rows of horizontal lines and proceeds to totally ignore it. Depictions of things lying around the studio—a briefcase, the base of a chair, a self-portrait, a television, as well as several indefinable scribbles and shapes—float randomly in every direction, unrelated even in relative scale. The paper becomes what it literally is—a surface to draw on; and the work becomes a series of graphic incidents unrelated to the whole. There is, as a result, an exhilarating feeling of freedom and release in these works, as if anything goes; and the quality of the drawing—its careless arrogance, its bold and frank sketchiness—is a source of surprise and delight which by itself becomes the painting's subject."[14] *Henry Inn No. 1* is an astonishing picture, but it is not an isolated example. Indeed, Garabedian's oeuvre is about freedom. He would probably say it's about *his* freedom, or possibly about *any* artist's freedom; but I want to say it goes beyond that, touching the very core of the modern experience and that it does so, not by projecting for us the possibilities of a sublime and idealized world—that would be closer to what someone like Louis did—but by grappling with the obdurate realities we find ourselves in and possessed by, through choice and design, because of our own physicality, or because we happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe we should call his a workingman's modernism, the American counterpart to the art Matisse made for the tired French businessman. We imagine Garabedian's viewer in shirtsleeves and blue collar, Matisse's in jacket and tie; the former settles down with sports section and beer in hand, the latter with the financial pages and an apéritif; one gets culture through occasional visits to the museum he's heard about, the other has it in his blood where it's been distilled for generations. The comparison is engaging, particularly in relation to Garabedian's recent interest in Matisse: "I would like to say I was master of my world and could state my paintings in an overpowering way, like they come from my intelligence and are knowledge that I state as a perfect case. We take Matisse, for instance, as being someone like that, though I'm sure he wasn't. You look at him and say these were real insights, this guy was just brilliant, his mind worked like a steel trap, and his paintings would seem to indicate that; but I guess *his* indications, in his writings, show that that's not true. There is a lot of searching within the individual paintings, changes upon changes upon changes. In that regard, I think I paint a little bit in that manner." The comparison is also engaging in relation to Garabedian's self-image. Two self-portraits from 1964 are especially revealing here. The first is small and it shows the artist with maulstick in one hand, palette and brushes in the other, dressed in a smock, and standing before

a large wooden cabinet. He seems to have stepped back to admire a picture which is outside our field of vision and to which he has just applied the finishing touch. The image is incongruous and amusing: Garabedian with the tools and attire of an Old Master, hamming it up, posing as the *artiste*. The second painting, called *Family Portrait*, is larger, more ambitious, and more carefully executed. It is dominated by a standing female figure, Garabedian's wife, next to whom is sêated a small child, the artist's first daughter. The woman stares meditatively into space, holding her right arm self-consciously over her waist while her left arm hangs with fingers crossed, as if for good luck. The child turns toward her, raises her left hand and points upward with her index finger, as if making a blessing. The solemn occasion is the building of the family home: we see its wooden frame rising behind the mother and child and, beyond the frame, the rolling hills of an idyllic landscape spreading into the distance. On the right side of the picture, somewhat in the background, we also see the artist—not with maulstick, palette and smock, and not posing, but in T-shirt and khakis, with saw in hand, intent on his work, bent to the job of construction. Significantly, it is the saw handle that bears the signature and date of this Renaissance-inspired, religious-like painting.

Garabedian doesn't make art with a saw, not exactly, but his pictures are invariably physical, openly displaying their materials and the workmanship that brought them into being. He used oil paint in graduate school and for a few years after that, and most of his work since 1978 has consisted of acrylic on canvas, conventional enough. In between, however, a wide range of unorthodox materials was explored: in the mid-sixties, Garabedian employed Flo-paque, an inexpensive hobby paint, along with butcher paper, cardboard, latex and ceramic; in the "Walls of China" series, 1968 to 1970, he built panels by gluing together slats of wood, cutting lines into the surfaces—it was here that the saw became a paintbrush—and filling the lines with colored resins; between 1970 and 1974 he created a series of monumental figures out of polyester resin, colored pencil, ink, acrylic and sawdust; and in the mid-seventies he watercolored, cut and pasted on paper collage. At times durable and at times fragile, the results are in all cases tangible and immediate. As the description of his studio indicates, Garabedian's handling of his materials has also been unconventional—casual, messy, even careless or silly. This combination of offbeat materials and informal handling has of course been evidence for seeing the artist as humorous and irreverent.[15] Which it is, though that picture is only partial; equally, it is evidence of what Garabedian means by freedom, and we would be missing that meaning if we focused exclusively on his behavior as a slap in the face of fine art and good taste and thereby failed to feel its positive and liberating impetus.

The bulk of Garabedian's work has been based on the human figure, although his approach to it has changed dramatically over thirty years, as have the meanings he has extracted from it. In one way or another, nearly all of those meanings deal with freedom, the struggle for it, the limitations on it, what it feels like once it is secured. In the earliest pictures, 1963 to 1966, a hermaphroditic bartender muses on his sexual identity; men and women abandon themselves in a sexual orgy; wrestlers swing one another on elastic arms; Jean Harlow, naked and dreamy-eyed, awakens on a hillside and the landscape responds to caress her body; a woman lies sick in bed while a friend gestures to comfort her; an assassination takes place in front of a couple making love; Napoleon Solo, the man from UNCLE, is shot to death while sitting on the toilet. Figures search and explore their physicality, seek release, succumb to disease, assault one another, die. More often than not, freedom is equated here with violent action, with breaking out, and so it becomes a possibility; but circumstances of the body, not to mention those of society and the world at large, limit it and render it desperate and remote. Moreover, the possibility of it is only crudely articulated, as if the subjects are groping for it on instinct alone, without consciousness of what they are doing, what they are after, or why it matters so deeply. Crude, too, is their presentation—slapdash, cartoon-like, awkward, expediently expressionistic, and yet somehow genuine and sincere, as though the artist sensed and understood their concern.

The resin paintings executed during the early seventies also deal with physically violent gestures and life-threatening situations. A young man holding like a tray a sheet of glass is poised atop a pile of garbage, at the base of which are strewn dead bodies; one man is on a collision course with a brick wall, another rips open his chest in the midst of bombed surroundings and flying debris; a woman stands in a bathroom littered with parts of a human skeleton. Carnage, mayhem and destruction, the world coming apart at its seams. And where is freedom here? Does it yield up to death? Or does death bring liberation? The works answer with mixed messages, as if our questions are theirs

too. Is the young man holding a piece of glass oblivious to the decay at his feet or has he triumphed over it? Is the man in the brick wall committing suicide or is he, with bent knees and flexed muscles, about to spring miraculously above it?[16] Does the man tear at his chest to end his misery or to project his heart into the world in order to give it new life? Does the woman in the bathroom raise her right hand to condemn the dead or to bless them? Echoes of the Last Judgment and the Apocalypse vibrate in these pictures, in part because of their subject matter, in part because their principal figures are so openly drawn from prototypes in religious paintings of the High Renaissance.[17] Indeed, their heroic stature separates them from their more vulnerable counterparts in Garabedian's work of the sixties; they seem fully capable of fighting back, and this imparts to the paintings a positive atmosphere, for these figures might well triumph in the face of their adversities. The artist's persistent sense of humor is also liberating, and his use of materials is inventive and meaningful. Built out of resin, the pictures are thick, hard and physically immediate, though their translucence makes them appear weightless and immaterial. As a result, the figures in them seem distanced, suspended in time and space, of this world yet belonging to another—like prehistoric insects that get preserved in amber. Ironically, this means not that they are imprisoned, for that is only literally the case, but that their struggles with self and circumstance are forever poignantly before us. Sealed in plastic, they are at least free from us.

In 1978 Garabedian began a series of paintings he calls prehistoric figures—male and female nudes moving about in landscapes that are littered with rocks, bones and assorted objects having no particular identity. The series initially consisted of nine panels, each measuring 40 by 30 inches, and in each one the figure is positioned close to the picture surface, at times appearing to stand on the lower framing edge and reach into our space. In many ways they comprise the tightest, most serial-oriented group of paintings the artist has done, and he seems to have needed that kind of structure when he started them. "I had been doing the collages and they were becoming so obscure, so bizarre in the sense that everying was idiosyncratic and obtuse. The marks I would make were kind of negligent, the colors were barely visible, the cutting was haphazard, yet it was all very successful in the sense that it represented something to me, something very strange and a little bit goofy. But after awhile, doing it every day started to seem mindless and I wanted to get away from it, so I thought, 'What's the most real, the most practical, down to earth, most difficult thing in the world to do in painting? Figure in landscape—nothing's tougher.' Then I set out rules for myself—not one morning, the thinking evolved over a period of about a month or so—and the result was the unified size of the panels and the idea of the figure up front, that was enough to get started. Then other questions came up, like whether I should use a model or not, and I decided not to, because you become too specific, you get involved with a sort of portraiture. I wanted to come up with an archetypal figure, and I realized the way to do that was simply by painting; by painting without a model, I had to come to my own conclusions about things and, strangely enough, I came up with a figure that was satisfying to me and answered the problem."

The limitations Garabedian set for himself did not obtain after he completed the first nine prehistoric figures. He quickly expanded his format to include multiple figures, fragments of ancient marble sculpture, stacks of old books and ruins, most of which allude to pre-Classical Greece.

His prehistoric figures had moved ahead in time, encountering civilization, but their behavior remained for the most part consistent with the norms established in the initial pictures. They sit and stand, twisting, arching, pointing and touching themselves, as if discovering their bodies for the first time. They move awkwardly and at times seem about to fall down. They look as though they are learning to walk and to explore space as they explore their own flesh. Unlike their ancestors in earlier pictures, they exhibit no violence; when they come upon ruins, they seem not to have caused the destruction, for they regard it with wonder or they simply ignore it. Garabedian says they have unformed minds, and it is in this that their freedom resides, for it means they are free from consciousness and from the doubt and anxiety that attend it. They are, in their way, pure, able to discover their selves and their world uninhibited by the structuring pressures and the constraints of received knowledge. They are the descendants of the woman in the bathroom and the man in the brick wall, but they are actually located where their forebears longed to be. It's an old theme, this desire for a pure state, even in the modern period when art finally lost access to pastoral landscapes and visions of Eden and looked for their equivalents among folk and primitive societies—like Gauguin—or chose to invent wholly new terms for them—like Matisse. It has been said that Garabedian refuses to fol-

low the principles of fine art. Maybe so. Nonetheless, he maintains a stong grip on its meaning.

In talking about the prehistoric figures, Garabedian said the landscapes gave him trouble: "What was really hard was the landscapes. They took me back to my mindless landscapes, my mindless abstractions, and at some point I realized I had been training myself for these landscapes, not so much how to paint them, but to convince myself they were all right to paint." The landscape abstractions the artist refers to were drawn, collaged and painted throughout the seventies, beginning with the remarkable *Henry Inn No. 1.* Other notable examples include *Henry Inn No. 3* (1975), *Picture for a Lady* (1976), *4* (1976), *Henry Inn No. 4* and *Henry Inn No. 5* (both 1978), and three pictures called *Ruin* (all 1978). Compared with the rather lean *Henry Inn No. 1,* the mid-seventies paintings are dense and complicated. They are largely abstract, but their tiered horizontal components strongly suggest a landscape orientation, as do their recurrent earthy colors, and hints of a wall here, a tree there, or a pathway somewhere else reinforce the impression. The "Walls of China," which were actually the artist's first non-figurative paintings, similarly combine nature and abstraction, but in more restricted amounts. Each tends to be dominated by a single unifying color, and horizon lines, even if fragmentary, register openly as such. However, both the earlier and the later pictures are perplexing. We are confronted by fields covered with random gestural incidents that display constant shifts of scale and imply warped spatial fluctuations. Unable to read them in any orderly manner, we jump about haphazardly, pausing, hastening on, retracing our steps, trying alternate routes, feeling confused and anxious, lost in a place we've never seen or heard about. And yet we simultaneously feel extraordinarily free before these pictures—free to discover and explore their worlds, to make our own way through them, to absorb without instruction their more and less significant aspects. Garabedian refers to them as his mindless landscapes, his mindless abstractions, which simply means that they are intuitively rather than rationally structured and that they provide an entirely suitable habitat for prehistoric figures who are likewise mindless. But they were clearly not conceived for that purpose, and their meaning is not restricted to it. By themselves they address our own situation—the one in which we find ourselves in a problematic relationship with our world; the one in which, unable finally to turn elsewhere for direction, we are forced to find our way from within; in other words, the modernist one.

An artist is someone who can do anything he wants, he epitomizes our freedom. But if we can do anything we want, what do we do? Freedom can be a burden. And where do we turn for inspiration? Of course we turn to ourselves. But what are the implications of this? Duchamp saw the question and concluded that art was merely personal, so he spent a few years exercising his license and making merely personal gestures, the readymades, and a few years later he retired, paralyzed, as it were, by his freedom. Matisse saw it too, and he spent his life making paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, ceramics, murals and stained-glass windows; he exercised his freedom and created the world anew, from the bottom up. And what of Garabedian and license and freedom? Surely, the humorous, irreverent, offbeat and informal look of his work has provoked thoughts of the former more than of the latter. In looking at the pictures, however, and in trying to read them closely, I have found myself thinking of freedom *instead* of license. This is because their liberties feel not taken, but earned.

Notes

1.
Unless otherwise noted, quotations are taken from interviews with the artist which took place in November, 1982.

2.
Mary Fuller, "Charles Garabedian: One View of the Los Angeles Art Scene," *Currant*, vol. 1, no. 5, December 1975/ January 1976, p. 33.

3.
Artforum, vol. II, no. 12, Summer 1964. Among the Ferun Gallery artists were Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Kenneth Price, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman and Edward Ruscha.

4.
Fuller, pp. 30–31.

5.
Op. cit., p. 58.

6.
Ibid.

7.
Ibid.

8.
Just a Great Thing to Do: Selected Works by Charles Garabedian, La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California, 1981, p. 2.

9.
Charles Kessler, introduction to the exhibition catalog, *Charles Garabedian*, Fine Arts Gallery, California State University at Northridge, Northridge, California, 1974, p. 17.

10.
Marcia Tucker, "An Appreciation," *Just a Great Thing to Do*, p. 11.

11.
Fred Hoffman, catalog essay for *Just a Great Thing to Do*, p. 51.

12.
Fuller, p. 30.

13.
Op. cit., p. 58.

14.
"The Fragile Sledgehammer of Charles Garabedian," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 50, no. 6, February 1976, p. 93. Henry Inn was the author of the book, *Chinese Houses and Gardens* (Honolulu, 1940), which the artist became interested in around 1968.

15.
See Kessler's essay in the Northridge exhibition catalog, pp. 6, 8 and 17.

16.
Ibid., pp. 14–17.

17.
Hoffman, p. 32, refers to *Man Holding a Piece of Glass* as a Last Judgment. For the Apocalypse, see Marcia Tucker, "An Iconography of Recent Figurative Painting: Sex, Death, Violence and the Apocalypse," *Artforum*, vol. XX, no. 10, June 1982, pp. 70–75.

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Lenders to the Exhibition

Charles Garabedian
Arthur and Carol Goldberg
Doris Fair Koren
Mr. and Mrs. David Lafaille
L. A. Louver Gallery and
Hirschl & Adler Modern
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Looker
Stathis Orphanos
Ludy and Theodore Strauss
David H. Vena

Catalog of the Exhibition

1 **Christ Under the Cross**

1963
Oil on canvas
70½"x83¾"

Collection
Stathis Orphanos

2 **The Sculptor**

1964
Oil on canvas
50"x29"

Courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery and Hirschl & Adler Modern

3 **The Bartender at Rest**

1964
Oil on canvas
54½"x30"

Courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery and Hirschl & Adler Modern

4 **Family Portrait**

1964
Oil on canvas
68"x60"

Collection the Artist

5 **The Orgy**

1965
Oil on canvas
18"x24"

Courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery and Hirschl & Adler Modern

6 **Jean Harlow**

1965
Oil on canvas
42¼"x56½"

Collection the Artist

7 **Baseball**

1965
Flo-Paque on paper
36¼"x77"

Collection the Artist

8 **Death of Napoleon Solo**

1965
Flo-Paque on paper
30¾"x48"

Courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery and Hirschl & Adler Modern

9 **Wrestlers**

1966
Flo-Paque on paper
21½"x50½"

Courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery and Hirschl & Adler Modern

10 **Restaurant (The Waitress)**

1966
Flo-Paque on cardboard
30"x40"

Courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery and Hirschl & Adler Modern

11 **Getting Well**

1966
Flo-Paque on cardboard
44½″x30½″

Courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery and Hirschl & Adler Modern

12 **Assassination**

1966
Flo-Paque on paper
31½″x35½″

Collection the Artist

13 **Love, Death, Gambling**

1966
Flo-Paque on paper
48″x54⅜″

Collection the Artist

14 **China Wall**

1968
Wood, acrylic and polyester resin
72″x92″

Collection the Artist

15 **Red China**

1968
Acrylic on wood
36″x97½″

Collection David H. Vena

16 **Green China Wall**

1969
Wood, acrylic and resin
95½″x73″x10″

Collection the Artist

17 **The Meeting of Greece and China**

1970
Wood, acrylic and polyester resin
97″x59½″

Collection the Artist

18 **Henry Inn No. 1**

1970
Acrylic and pencil on paper
106″x95″

Courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery and Hirschl & Adler Modern

19 **Man Holding a Piece of Glass**

1971
Resin, acrylic and ink
66″x88″

Collection the Artist

20 **Man in the Brick Wall**

1972
Polyester resin, colored pencil, acrylic and sawdust
89¼″x66⅝″

Collection the Artist

21 **Self Portrait**

1972
Resin, pencil and paper
28½″x41″

Private Collection

22 **Woman in the Bathroom**

1973
Resin
88½″x136″

Collection the Artist

23 **Man Tearing His Heart Out**

1974
Resin, fiberglass and acrylic
100¼″x104″

Collection the Artist

24 **Adam and Eve**

1974
Acrylic collage
40″x65″

Collection Mr. and Mrs. David Lafaille

25 **Henry Inn No. 3**

1975
Acrylic on canvas
83¾″x97″

Collection the Artist

26 **Chinese Mr. Hyde**

1975
Acrylic on canvas
97″x83¾″

Private Collection

27 **4**

1976
Acrylic on canvas
97″x83¾″

Collection Mr. and Mrs. David Lafaille

28 **Picture for a Lady**

1976
Watercolor on paper collage
80½″x80″

Collection the Artist

29 **Ruin I**

1978
Acrylic on canvas
54″x54″

Collection Mr. and Mrs. David Lafaille

30 **Ruin II**

1978
Acrylic on canvas
54″x54″

Collection Judy and Theodore Strauss

31 **Ruin III**

1978
Acrylic on canvas
54″x54″

Collection
Doris Fair Koren

32 **Henry Inn No. 4**

1978
Acrylic on canvas
78″x59½″

Collection the Artist

33 **Prehistoric Figure**

1978–80
Acrylic on panel
40″x30″

Collection the Artist

34 **Prehistoric Figure**

1978–80
Acrylic on panel
40″x30″

Collection the Artist

35 **Ruins VI**

1981–82
Acrylic on canvas
102″x84″

Private Collection

36 **Acropolis Motel**

1981
Acrylic on canvas
72″x72″

Private Collection

37 **Life Amidst the Ruins**

1982
Acrylic on canvas
36″x60″

Collection
Arthur and Carol Goldberg

38 **I May Not Be Right But I Can't Think of Anything Else**

1982
Acrylic on canvas
72″x96″

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert Looker

39 **Still Life with Self Portrait**

1982
Acrylic on canvas
36″x60″

Courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery and Hirschl & Adler Modern

40 **Island #1**

1982
Acrylic on canvas
72″x96″

Private Collection

The Sculptor

1964
Oil on canvas
50″x29″

Courtesy L.A. Louver
Gallery and Hirschl
& Adler Modern

The Bartender at Rest

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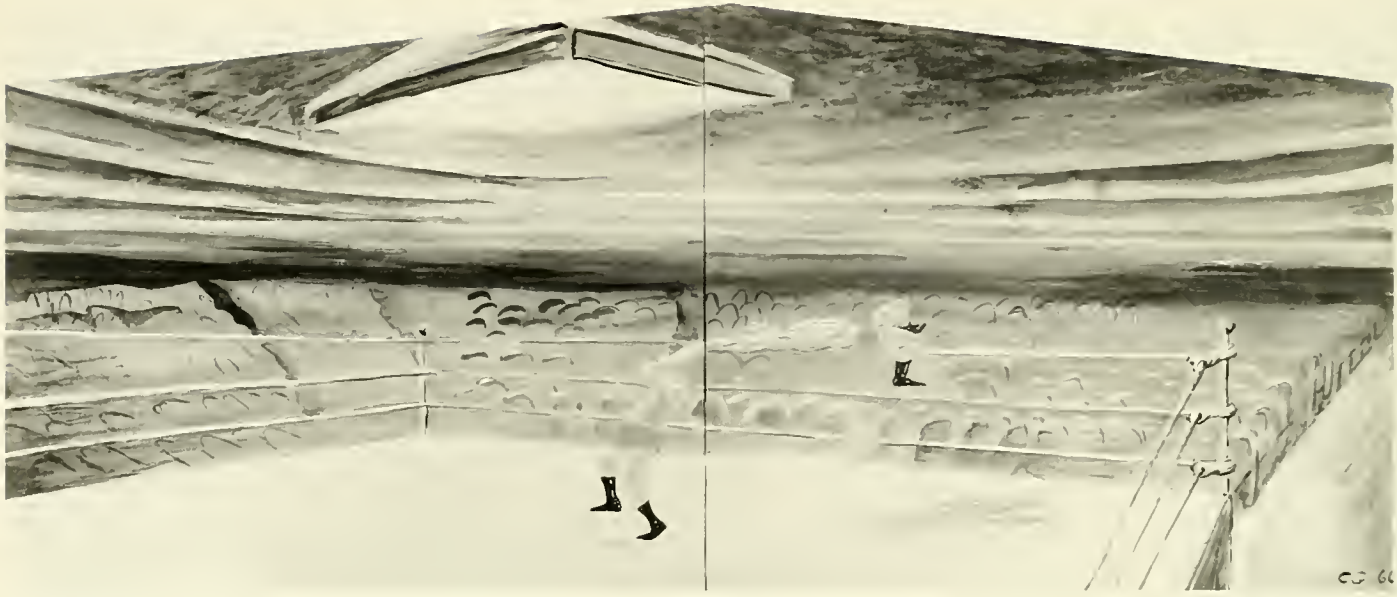
Courtesy L.A. Louver
Gallery and Hirschl
& Adler Modern



Assassination

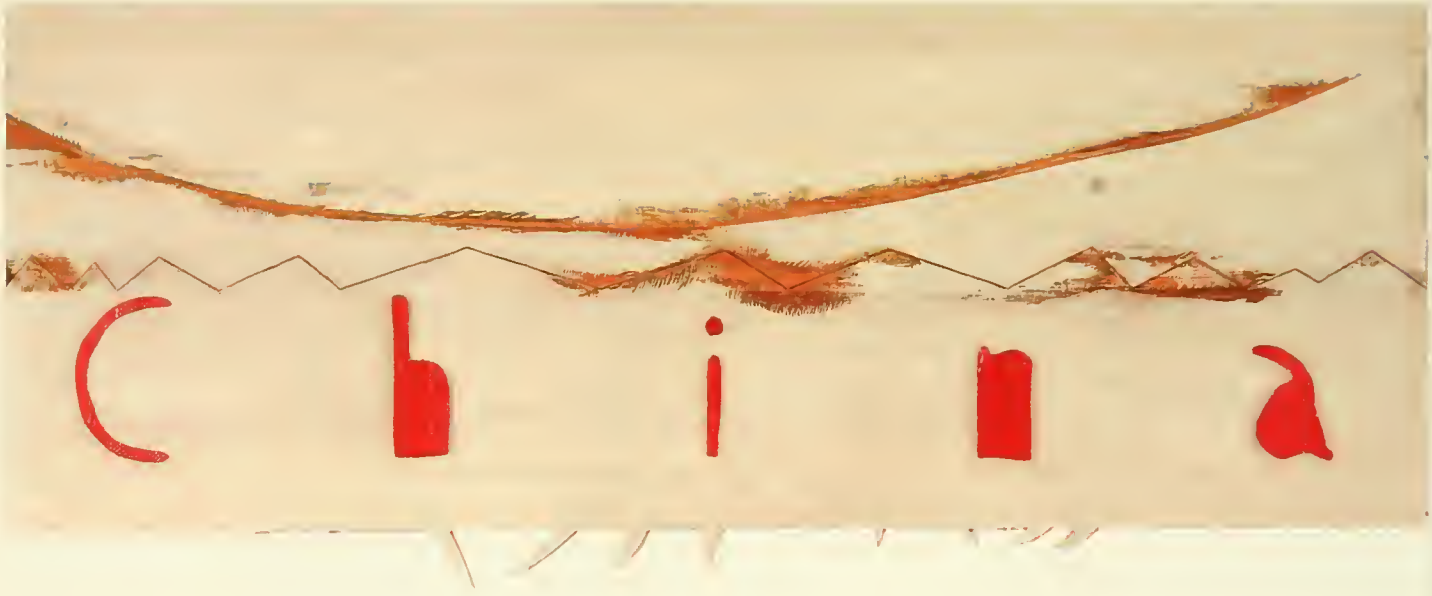
1966
Flo-Paque on
paper
31½"x35½"

Collection the Artist

Red China

1968
Acrylic on wood
36″x97½″

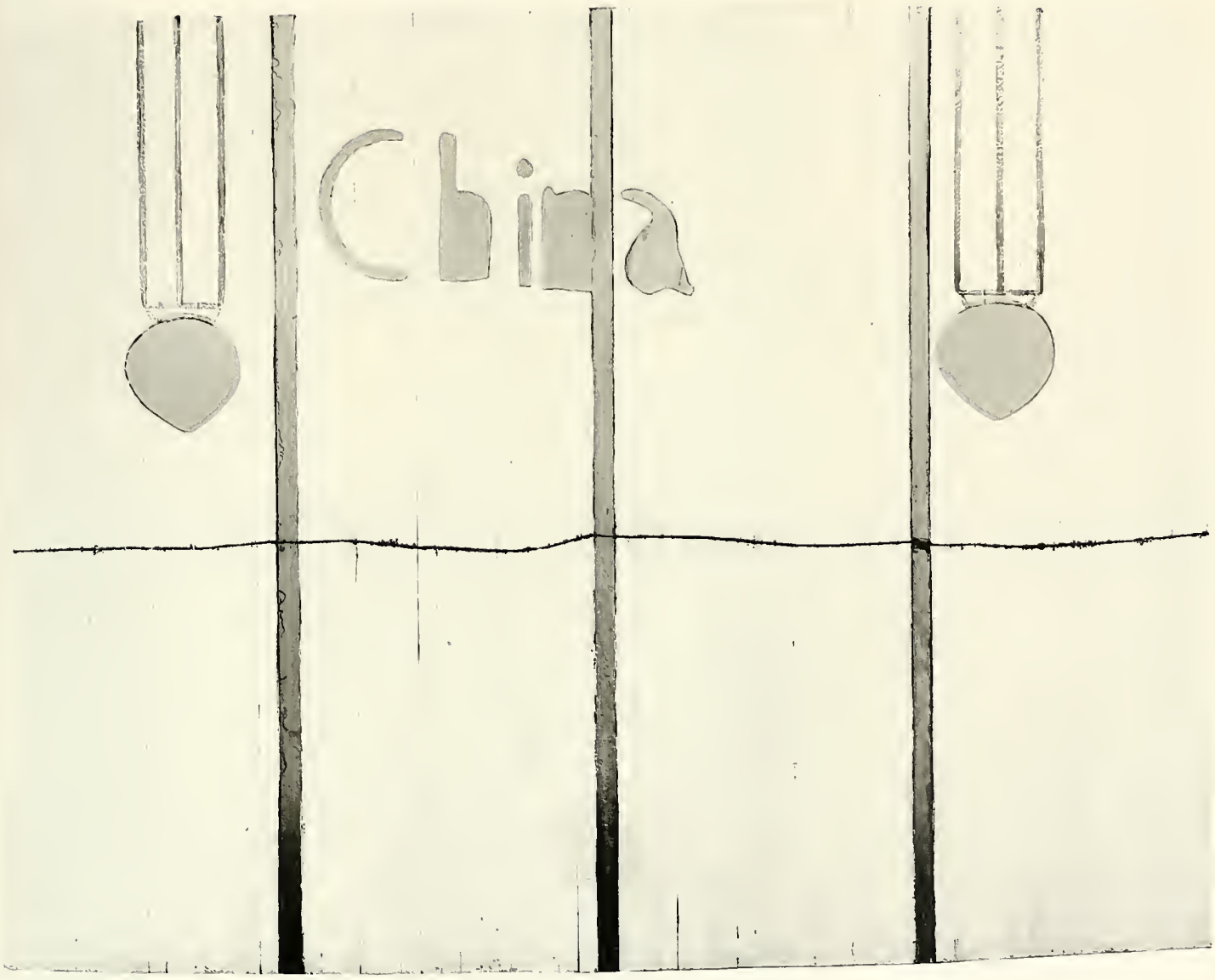
Collection David H. Vena



China Wall

1968
Wood, acrylic and
polyester resin
72″x92″

Collection the Artist



Green China Wall

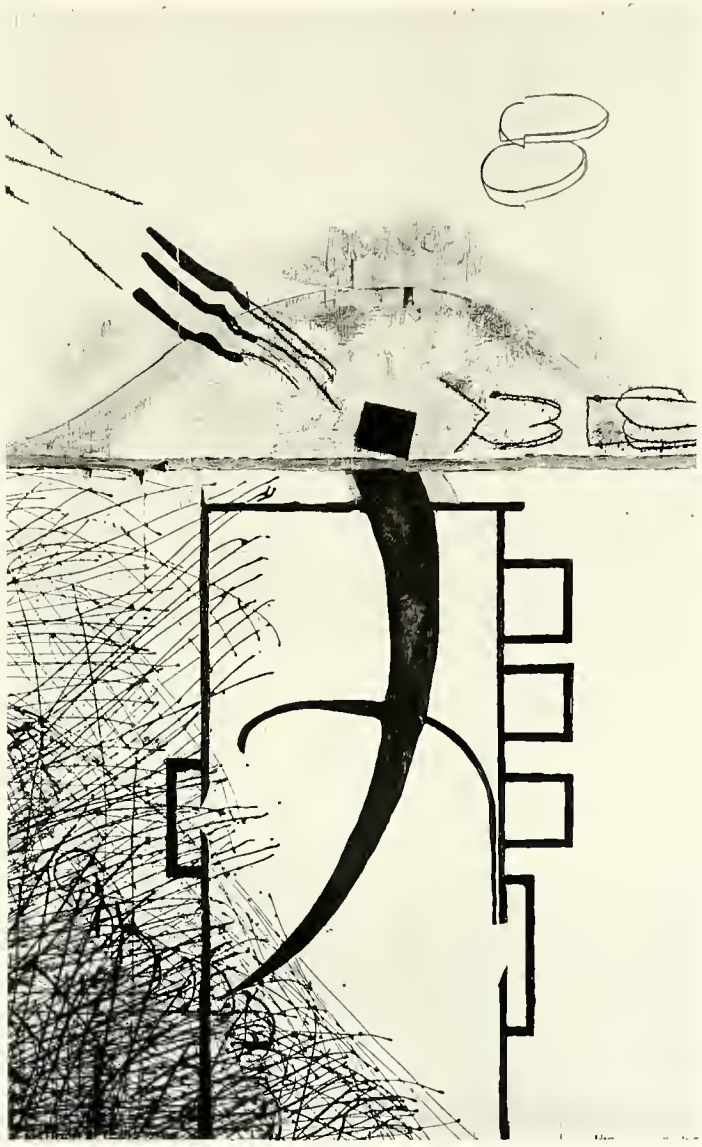
1969
Wood, acrylic and resin
95½" x 73" x 10"

Collection the Artist

The Meeting of Greece and China

1970
Wood, acrylic and polyester resin
97″x59½″

Collection the Artist



Henry Inn No. 1

1970
Acrylic and pencil
on paper
106"x95"

Courtesy L.A. Louver
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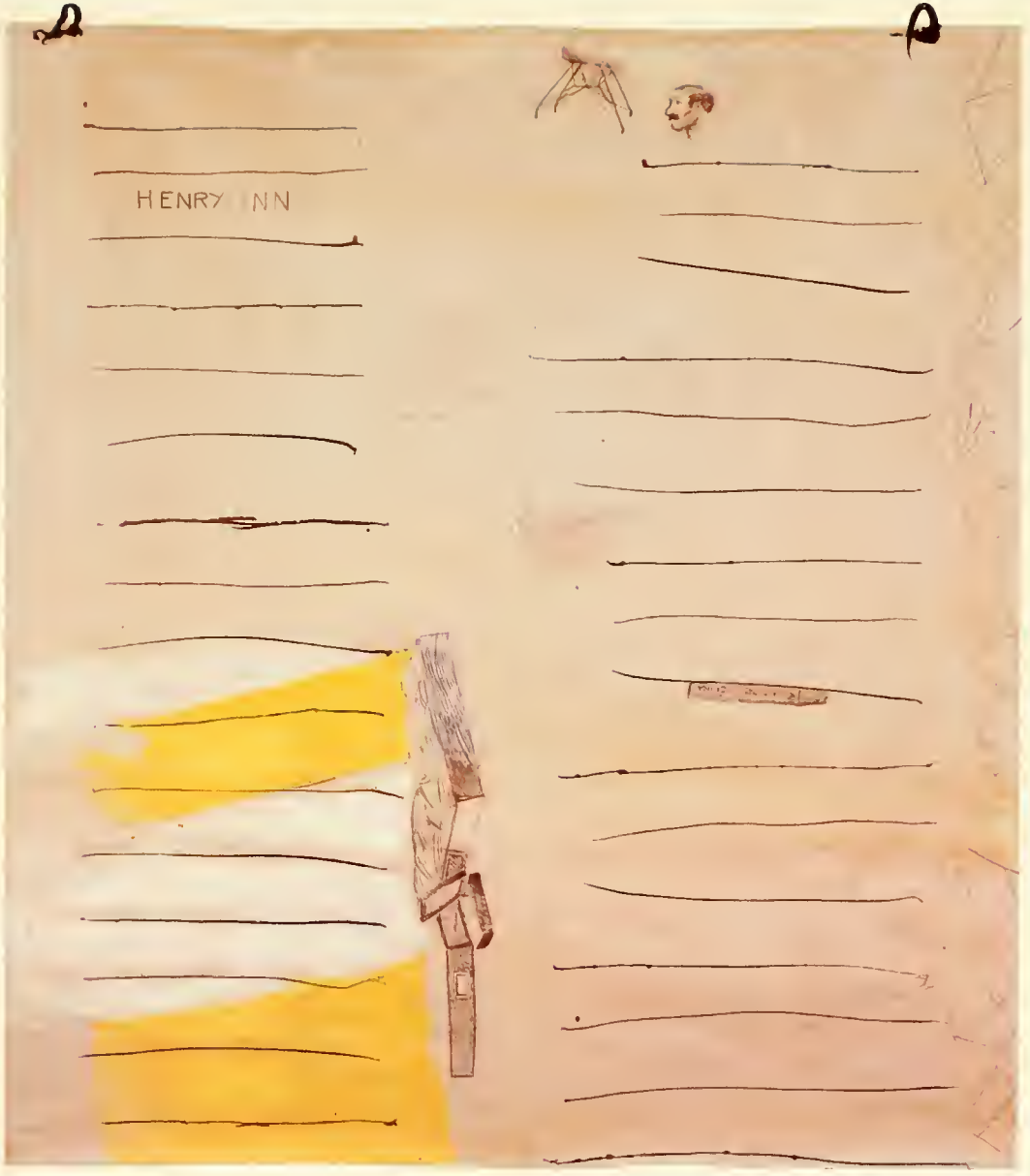
& Adler Modern



Man Holding a Piece of Glass

1971
Resin, acrylic and ink
66″x88″

Collection the Artist

Self Portrait

1972
Resin, pencil
and paper
28½"x41"

Private Collection

Man in the Brick Wall

1972
Polyester resin, colored pencil, acrylic and sawdust
89¼" x 66⅝"

Collection the Artist

Woman in the Bathroom

1973
Resin
88½" x 136"

Collection the Artist

Man Tearing His Heart Out

1974
Resin, fiberglass and acrylic
100¼" x 104"

Collection the Artist

Adam and Eve

1974
Acrylic collage
40″x65″

Collection Mr. and
Mrs. David Lafaille

Chinese Mr. Hyde

1975
Acrylic on canvas
97″x83¾″

Private Collection

Henry Inn No. 3

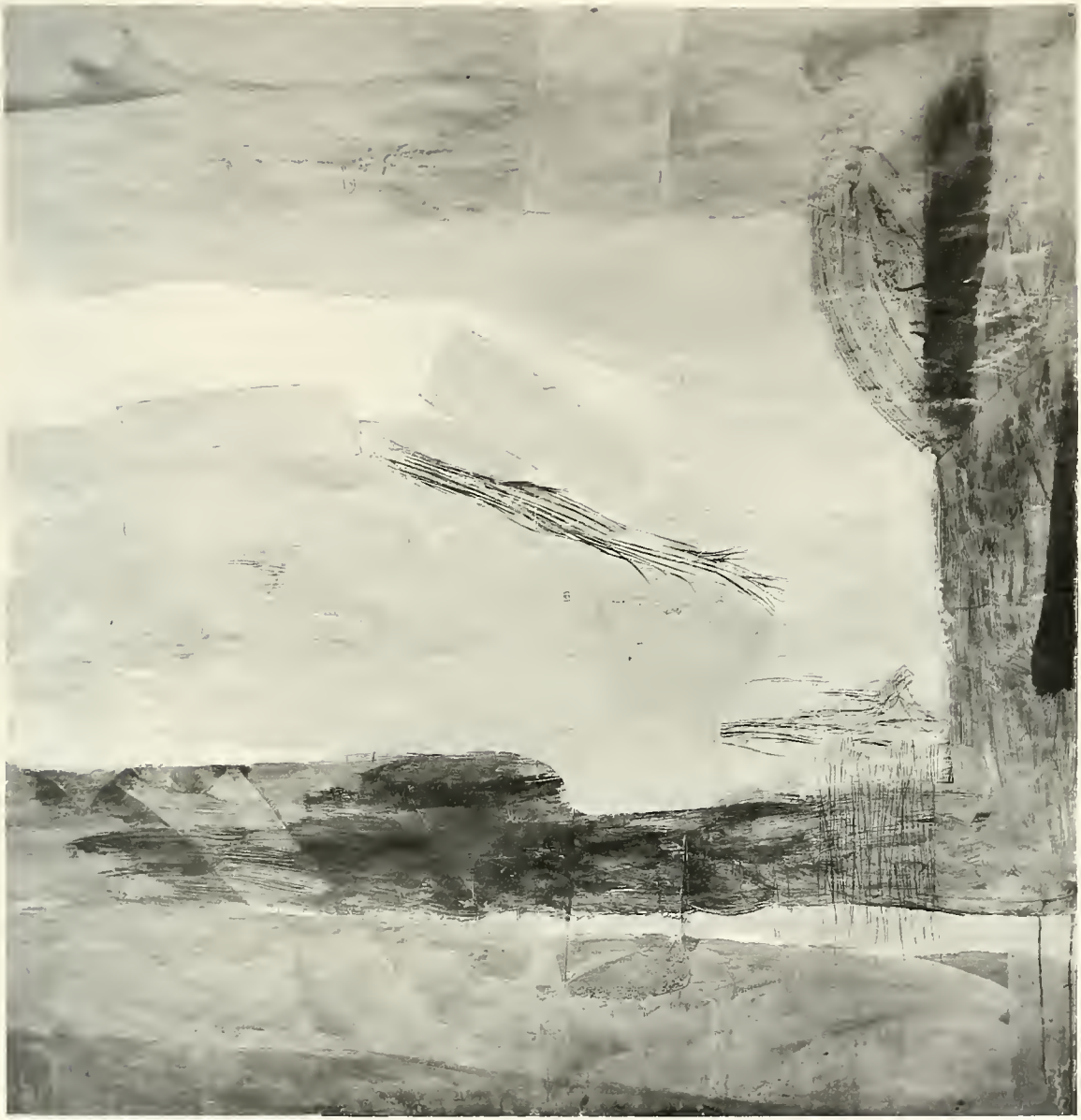
1975
Acrylic on canvas
83¾"x97"

Collection the Artist

Picture for a Lady

1976
Watercolor on
paper collage
80½″x80″

Collection the Artist



1976
Acrylic on canvas
97" x 83¾"

Collection Mr. and
Mrs. David Lafaille

Ruin I

1978
Acrylic on canvas
54″x54″

Collection Mr. and
Mrs. David Lafaille

Ruin II

1978
Acrylic on canvas
54"x54"

Collection Ludy and
Theodore Strauss

Ruin III

1978
Acrylic on canvas
54″x54″

Collection Doris
Fair Koren

Prehistoric Figure

1978–80
Acrylic on panel
40″x30″

Collection the Artist

Acropolis Motel

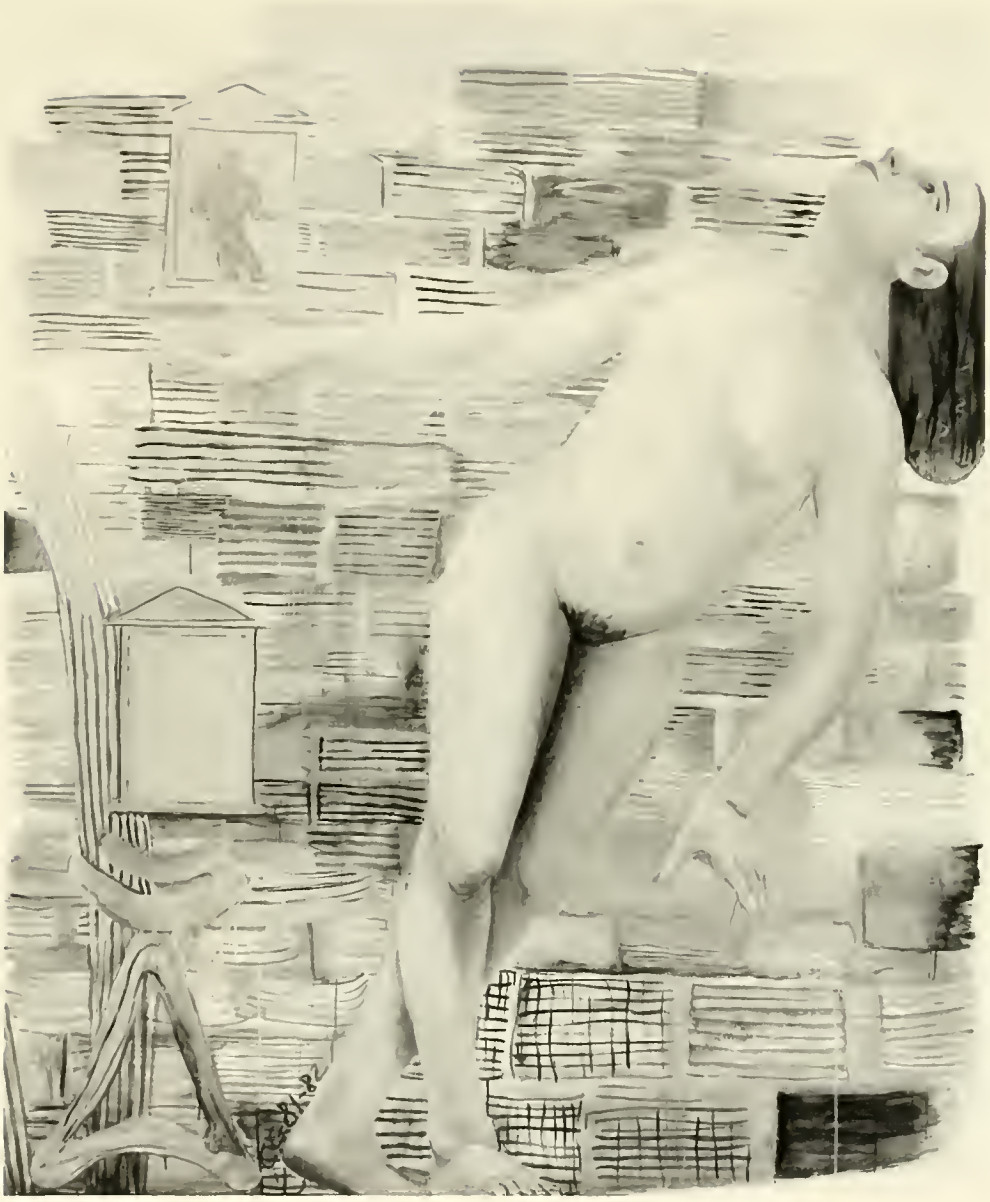
1981
Acrylic on canvas
72″x72″

Private Collection

Ruins VI

1981–82
Acrylic on canvas
102" x 84"

Private Collection



Life Amidst the Ruins

1982
Acrylic on canvas
36″x60″

Collection
Arthur and Carol Goldberg

Island #1

1982
Acrylic on canvas
72″x96″

Private Collection

Still Life with Self Portrait

1982
Acrylic on canvas
36"x60"

Courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery and Hirschl & Adler Modern

I May Not Be Right But I Can't Think of Anything Else

1982
Acrylic on canvas
72"x96"

Collection Mr and Mrs. Robert Looker